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# The Influence of Futurist painting in my music

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The year 1913 is often hailed as one of the milestones of classical music. It was the year that Stravinsky and Debussy composed their ballets *The Rite of Spring* and *Jeux* respectively and Schoenberg produced *Pierrot Lunaire*. For another group of composers, from later in the twentieth century, the year 1913 is seen as a significant not for the composition of any of these remarkable classical milestones, but for the writing of a manifesto. This manifesto was the *Art of Noises* by Luigi Russolo. In this work Russolo called for nothing less than a revolution in music. He wrote,

Musical sound is too limited in qualitative variety of timbre... we must break out of this narrow circle of pure musical sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise sounds. Let us cross a great modern capital with our ears more alert than our eyes and we will enjoy creating mental orchestrations of the crashing down of metal shop blinds, slamming doors, the hubbub and shuffle of crowds, the variety of din from the stations, railways, iron foundries, spinning mills, printing works, electric power stations and underground railways[i].

As a composer I am continually fascinated, as Russolo was, by the sonic potential of the everyday sounds I hear around me. I have since 1993, when I first had the opportunity to work with electronic sound at BEAST (Birmingham Electroacoustic Sound Theatre) composed a number of electronic works that utilize recorded sound. However, from the very first of these works (*Melt* composed in 1993-4) I was aware of the effect that these found objects were having on the perception of the completed work. I no longer listened to them as I had the works of Stravinsky or Boulez, rather, I was aware that these found objects were stimulating other personal associations and did so in others when I played the works to them. I was interested in the relationship between how the use of these sonic found objects related to the use of found objects in Futurist and Cubist painting and sculpture that emerged contemporaneously with Russolo's manifesto and also, whether any of the techniques employed to create these kaleidoscopic images could be applied to my own compositions.

Although Russolo was unable to realize fully the sonic implications of his manifesto, despite the invention of the intonorum and other new sound generating instruments, many of Russolo's contemporaries in field of the visual arts were pushing at the boundaries of their genre by including the use of 'non-art' or found objects in their work. One of the most famous was Duchamp's dadist *Fountain* (1917). However, before this Picasso and Braque had used cloth, newspaper clippings and other everyday objects in their paintings to create cubist collages. Amongst other objects, Picasso used a rope as a frame in *Still life with Guitar* (1912) and a large piece of printed cloth in *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912). The latter has the paradoxical effect of on the one hand suggesting a real chair but at the same time reinforces the artifice of the two-dimensional image. Apollinaire, aware of the dichotomy in perception this use of found objects engendered wrote,

The object is the inner frame of the picture and marks the limits of its profundity just as the actual frame marks its external limits (McCully, 1982: 74).

The use of these 'non-art' materials or found objects was also important to the Futurists. Reflecting Apollinaire's above statement it became generally accepted that the use of found objects:

- 1) provides an internal frame
- 2) provides a fragment of actuality erupting within a fictional environment
- 3) violates the self-referential autonomy of the work of art and threatens to obliterate the distance between it and the spectator.

All three of these statements are equally applicable to sound. However, it is interesting to note how some of the debate that the use of these found objects sparked amongst painters of the period are reflected in the somewhat more hostile debates between Boulez and Schaeffer a generation later. Papini, one of the painters who was associated with the original *Manifesto of Futurist Painting* (1910), believed that the substitution of mere objects for pictorial representations would negate the personality of the artist, and in doing so art would become indistinguishable from reality. Boccioni countered this argument by maintaining that once a found object had become part of the material of an artwork, the function it fulfills within that work is considered in relation to its 'new' context. The latter argument is certainly one many contemporary electroacoustic composers would recognize.

A medium that actively encourages ambiguity and multiplicity of perception is regarded by many of its practitioners as one of the most powerful aspects of sonic art as an auditory form. Sonic art allows for the recontextualizing and collaging of naturally occurring sounds, encourages associations between differing 'environments' and creates multiple possible meanings by the juxtaposition of differing sound objects. In many ways, listening to a work of sonic art is analogous to reading a poem, in that where the poem recontextualizes everyday words and manipulates syntax, so a work of sonic art may recontextualize recognizable sounds and manipulate perception of these sounds by juxtaposition and temporal displacement. The method of interpretation concerning the perception of the original, natural or cultural context of the sonic event and the subsequent intentionality of meaning that derives from the new musical context created by the composer is termed 'transcontextual interpretation' by Denis Smalley, who writes:

In transcontextual music intrinsic qualities and relations as created by the composer determine the impact of extrinsic messages... The wide-open sonic world of electroacoustic music encourages imaginative and imagined extrinsic connections because of the variety and ambiguity of its materials. (Smalley, 1992:6).

Having investigated the use of found objects and their subsequent perception in an artwork or composition I was still keen to investigate whether the translation of the painting techniques utilized in the works of Picasso, Braque, Carra, Balla and Severini could be adapted to work with sonic material. It quickly became obvious that despite the surface similarity of the cubist and futurist paintings produced in the early 1910s their underlying construction was very different. Whilst the cubist painters were concerned with the polyocular interpretation of a *static* object the Futurists were concerned with the representation of *movement* inherent in modern society. They expressed this sense of movement through two techniques called *dynamism* and *divisionism*. It was these two techniques that were to become fundamental to the way in which I compose with found sonic materials. In the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* (1910) it is clear that the techniques of dynamism and divisionism are central to the way in which objects and their surrounding environment is depicted. Dynamism is described in the following manner in the Manifesto:

The gesture which we would reproduce on canvas shall no longer be a fixed moment in universal dynamism. It shall simply be the dynamic sensation itself... Indeed, all things move, all things run, all things are rapidly changing. A profile is never motionless before our eyes, but it constantly appears and disappears. On account of the persistency of an image upon the retina, moving objects constantly multiply themselves; their form changes like rapid vibrations, in their mad career. Thus a running horse has not four legs, but twenty, and their movements are triangular[ii].

and divisionism as:

Our bodies penetrate the sofas upon which we sit, and the sofas penetrate our bodies. The motor bus rushes

into the houses which it passes, and in their turn the houses throw themselves upon the motor bus and are blended with it...The construction of pictures has hitherto been foolishly traditional. Painters have shown us the objects and the people placed before us. We shall henceforward put the spectator in the center of the picture[iii].

These techniques can clearly be seen in Russolo's *Dynamism of an Automobile* (1912-13),



and Giacomo Balla's *Speeding Automobile* (1912),



Of particular importance for me in these works were how the movement of these concrete objects was implied through the use of ‘force lines’. Mark Antliff writes,

In the February 1912 catalogue for the Futurist’s first Parisian exhibition, written mostly by Boccioni, “the sheaves of lines corresponding to all of the conflicting forces, following the general law of violence” in Carra’s work [Funeral of the Anarchist Galli (1911)] are labeled “force lines” The irradiating expansion of these lines has a psychological effect on the viewer, so that he or she is “obliged to struggle himself with the personalities in the picture.” The transcription of proletarian battle into abstract pictorial form - along with its subsequent impact on the viewing public - encapsulated the Futurist idea of “physical transcendentalism.” which sees force lines as “the beginnings or prolongations of the rhythms that objects imprint on our sensibility”. (Antliff, 2000:1)

Antliff goes on to demonstrate how the theoretical foundation of Boccioni’s work, particularly the 1914 treatise *Pittura scultura Futuriste: Dinamismo plastica*, has its roots in Henri Bergson’s notions of temporality and intuitive consciousness taken from his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903). Although Antliff’s article enhanced my theoretical and contextual understanding of the Futurist painters and in particular Boccioni’s work, it was Boccioni’s original writing that force lines were the beginnings or prolongations of the rhythms that objects imprint on our sensibility that was most important in my early works.

The use of force lines in my work can be heard right at the very opening of my first electroacoustic composition *Melt* (1994). The work initially grew out of my daily travels to the studio in Birmingham, where the work was composed, from my home some twenty miles away. The work extensively uses the sounds of trains, station announcements and other sounds associated with the railway. As my first electroacoustic work I was aware that, by its very subject matter it made reference to Schaeffer’s early *Etude aux Chemins de Fer* (generally acknowledged as the first piece of electroacoustic music). I also drew influence from three artworks: Turner’s *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844) Balla’s *Speeding Automobile* (1912) and Gino Severini’s *Suburban Train*



*Arriving in Paris* (1915). The quality of Turner's work that appealed to me was the sense that more definable objects have been painted over, hard lines dissolved. There is a sense of implication and suggestion in this painting than mere realism. In the work of Balla and Severini (see below) I saw a clear indication of how I could work with the found sonic materials I had recorded.

Severini *Suburban Train Arriving in Paris* (1915)



*Melt* is essentially the sonic depiction of a train journey. The work is based on the mediation between extremes: i) smooth to pulsed motion, ii) raw to highly processed sonic material. *Melt* also draws upon all three levels of event-gesture: i) raw recordings of trains, station announcements and station concourses, ii) processed concrete materials or synthetic materials which are modeled after the motion and characteristics of the raw source materials, iii) synthetic materials that act as continuations of the force lines implied by the sonic materials. In this sound example from the beginning of the work you can hear how the horn of a train is extended by means of its implied force line. This sound is then slowly morphed with the sound of the moving train as the two are interpenetrated by divisionism (sound example 1).

In this second example from later in the work differing layers of material collide to create a form of sonic brassage. This technique represents the interpenetration of different force lines. Although composed in stereo, the aim is to create a poly-sonic perspective on the concrete materials. In later works such as *Aerial* (2002) and *Silk to Steel* (2005) this technique would be applied to a multi-channel sound space (sound example 2).

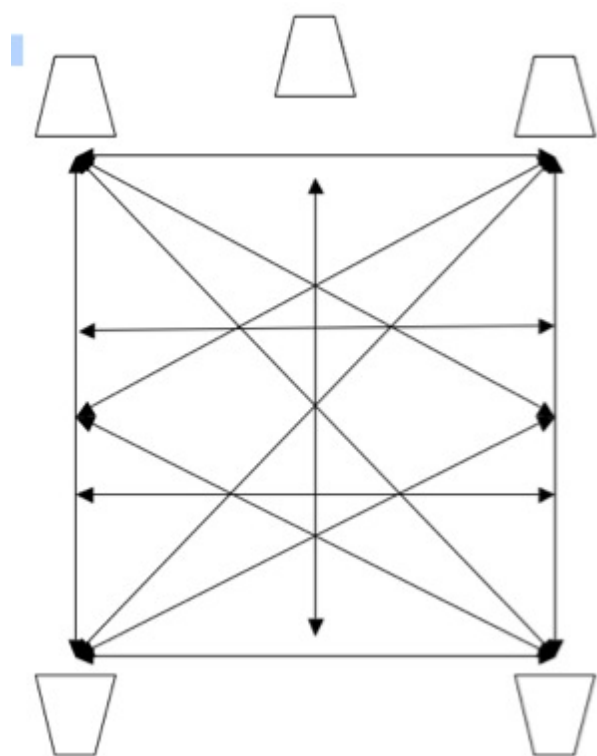
As I researched Futurism and other related arts of this period that were concerned with the manipulation of time and the movement of objects through space I was struck by the film techniques used by Serge Eisenstein in the 1920s and 1930s. Eisenstein fragmented sequential

time in his films by presenting the last action of one scene as the beginning of the next. However, the overlapping similar material of the 'next' scene was filmed from a different angle. This method of discontinuous editing treats time as an artifact that can be manipulated rather than as a linear progression that marches on regardless. The combination of Futurist painting techniques and Eisenstein's method of discontinuous editing was to have a profound effect on the musical style used in *Pagan Circus* (1996/7). The work continues to develop sonic material predominantly through the use of force lines and divisionism with differing layers of musical material interpenetrating one another. However, the surface of the work is much more restless due to the use of varying lengths of discontinuous edits to create longer musical lines (sound example 3).

*Symbiont* (2002) takes an altogether different approach to Futurist techniques. *Symbiont* is a hybrid work, utilizing elements of electronica within an acousmatic structural frame. The work makes extensive use of concrete sounds and synthetic beats. The concrete sounds and their highly processed derivatives are treated in a manner that I would (after working with this Futurist-derived technique for nearly a decade) consider common in my work. In this work what I wanted to test was not the materials themselves but the interpenetration of different musical styles. In *Symbiont* it is therefore not only the sonic materials themselves that are governed by Futurist techniques but also the differing genres of music that are 'sampled' to constitute the material of the piece. Extensive use is made of old vinyl recordings of Purcell, Puccini and Wolff (vocal and string music), as well as synthetic beats and a host of found sonic materials. Each of these layers of musical material (sampled classical, electronica beats and electroacoustic found sounds) are processed separately so as to create three distinct sonic lines. The divisionism that subsequently takes place within the composition is mostly concerned with how these three differing stylistic layers interpenetrate. Such a hybridization of musical elements gives *Symbiont* a very different surface sound from many of my other works.

Although *Symbiont* was remixed in 2005 in 5.1 it remains to my mind an essentially stereo working out of the principles I set out to explore. In *Silk to Steel* (2005) I therefore purposefully wanted to extend the techniques explored in previous works by applying them to a multi-channel sound environment from the outset. *Silk to Steel* was commissioned by the Institut de Musique Électroacoustique de Bourges in 2005. The work is a 50th birthday tribute to the composer Christopher Fox and uses selected passages from Fox's piano work *Prime Site* (1997) as its basis. The structure of *Silk to Steel* is also derived from Fox's work.

The original seven movements of *Prime Site* are concentrated into seven interlinking sections, each like Fox's focussing on single articulations with resonance, rhythm, harmony, gestural counterpoint and density. Rather than create a series of standard variations, the work refracts the source materials through the Futurist painting techniques of divisionism and dynamism. Divisionism is particularly used throughout the work to chart the evolution and reinterpretation of the original piano material with its 'electroacoustic' mirror or counterpart. The application of divisionism to the sonic material in this work also provides an original means of structuring spatial elements as opposed to the use of algorithmic or traditional sound diffusion techniques.





In *Silk to Steel* I subdivided the traditional 5.1 speaker arrangement to create thirteen spatial planes (see diagram above). The intention behind the creation of these planes was to create trajectories for sonic material. When any two planes cross, the sonic material on these planar trajectories interpenetrates (divisionism). This is reflected sonically on a number of levels: the phrase will end, a stark rhythmic juxtaposition may occur, there may be a cross-synthesis of materials or another timbral manipulation of the sonic elements, or the material may fuse (e.g. through convolution) and may change in pitch (including glissando). The following examples from *Silk to Steel* demonstrate how the techniques that I first incorporated into my compositional language in *Melt* (1994) have now become central to my musical

As I continue to research the theoretical writings relating to the Futurist painters and sculptors it becomes clearer and clearer to me that whilst Russolo's writing concerning the emancipation of sound, central though it has been to the development of electronic music, the treatises of Boccioni and others that contain the revolutionary ideas concerning structure, spatial representation, perception of time and a fusion of the corporeal and ethereal, although originally applied to painting and sculpture, can offer something equally revolutionary to electronic music.

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[ii] Boccioni, U., Carra, C., Russolo, L., Balla, G., Severini, G. *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting*, <http://www.unknown.nu/futurism/techpaint.html>

[iii] *ibid.* 2

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